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AUTHOR Owen, Michael; Hotchkis, Richard
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the student characteristics of Athabasca University (AU), Alberta, Canada, a distance and open university, and asked whether AU serves the student clientele that its mission proposes and to what the AU graduates attribute success. Established to make it possible for people to earn a university education regardless of where they live or work, or their commitments to careers or families, AU removes the barriers of time, space, past educational experience and to some degree level of income. Using biographies, responses to a graduate survey and institutional studies data, the study found that AU does reduce the major barriers of time, space and previous educational attainment to higher education in Alberta, Canada. Data indicated that many graduates attended AU to improve their career prospects though many entered or re-entered to obtain their first degree. Most students (68 percent) and graduates (63 percent) are women who study for self-improvement and intellectual stimulation rather than for higher professional qualifications, a frequent reason for men to study. Data also suggested that AU does reduce barriers to higher education study for women. The data also indicated that the AU experience assisted students to gain in self-esteem and self-confidence. Included are 17 references. (JB)

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DRAFT PAPER

Who benefits from distance education?
A study of Athabasca University graduates, 1985-1990

Michael Owen¹ and Richard Hotchkis²

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Introduction

As universities face another era of fiscal restraint, barriers to university level education have been reintroduced through reduced quotas, higher tuition fees, and higher admission standards. At the same time, governments and educators express their commitment to the maintenance of "accessibility". In the 1960s and 1970s open and distance universities were perceived to be one answer to the question of how to increase accessibility to university level education. Throughout the world, open and distance teaching institutions were created, the British Open University usually being the model. In Canada, the Alberta government created Athabasca University as one response to the demand for greater accessibility to higher education (Hughes, 1980; Byrne 1990).

The "mission" of Athabasca University (AU) is unique among Canadian universities: to make "it possible for people to earn a university education regardless of where they live or work, or their commitments to careers or families. Now, where there is a will to learn, there is a way to learn. [AU] remove[s] the barriers of *time, space, past educational experience*, and, to a great degree, *level of income*."³

¹ Director, Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan. Dr. Michael Owen has written on distance education, the history of education in Canada, and religious history.

² Institutional Analyst, Athabasca University, Athabasca, Alberta, T0G 2R0. Richard Hotchkis is an Institutional Analyst in the Athabasca University Centre for Distance Education. He has presented many papers on distance education research to adult education conferences and is preparing a Ph.D. dissertation that focuses on the social structures that exist for students learning at a distance.

³ Athabasca University 1990-91 Calendar, p. 5. Italics in the original.

This mission is a difficult one to achieve. As with other open and distance universities, Athabasca University employed a number of strategies to achieve its self-identified mission. The University has maintained its open admissions policy -- the prospective student need only be a Canadian resident, 18 years of age or older. While students must also be literate in the English language, the university has no requirements vis a vis previous education. Students may enroll even if they have not completed elementary or secondary education. The university has attempted to eliminate the barrier of time by having most courses/programs offered in a "home study" mode. Some courses have an audio or video or computer component. Home study permits the student to identify the course and the time (start date and study period) that she might wish to study. Students are constrained only by the requirement that they have six months to complete a three credit (one semester) course and that the "tutor" is available only at certain periods (usually three hours one night per week, although other strategies have been introduced to extend students' access to tutors.) The barrier of space has been removed by eliminating the need for the student to be in a classroom in a specific location at a specific time. The telephone access to a tutor who is a subject matter expert provides the student with individualized tuition. The barrier of income has only been partially overcome through provincial student finance plans and the ability of students to study while at work or in the home, without needing to relocate to a "university" town.

Athabasca University, that its open admissions policies and its distance delivery modes, has opened up university level education to thousands of individual Canadians who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to study university-level courses or acquire university-level certification. Also, through its liberal credit coordination capabilities and residency requirements, AU enables individual members of Canada's highly mobile workforce to acquire university level credentials who would have been excluded by most universities' residency restrictions. Moreover, the university has maintained high standards for course development and tuition.

As an institution committed to reducing barriers to university level instruction, there is a need to study the characteristics of the student population, their performance, and the level of success they have experienced in their studies. Like other open and distance universities, AU has produced many studies of persistence/dropouts, demography, and characteristics of students at risk. Only recently, however, have researchers studied the graduates and to what they attribute their success.⁴

⁴ The only previous study of AU graduates was prepared by the Office of Institutional Studies. See "Study of AU Graduates", Athabasca University, 1985.

Byrne (1990) provided vignettes of ten early AU students, all whom graduated. These

In this paper, we answer the question: Does AU serve the student population that it wishes to serve? We suggest that AU has succeeded in overcoming some of the barriers to higher education and opened up university level education to many students to whom it would otherwise have been denied. Moreover, the graduate biographies and responses to a graduate questionnaire show that AU graduates, and many typical AU students, are untypical university students.

The Athabasca University student: Characteristics

Who is the AU student? Common to the experience of many other post-secondary distance education institutions, AU finds that most of its students are women (65%)⁵ who are 25-45 years of age,⁶ live in urban (70%) rather than rural (30%) centres, and have some previous post-secondary education (73%). In addition, with Alberta's wide range of post-secondary level institutions (3 other universities, 3 private colleges offering baccalaureate degrees, at least 9 colleges offering the first two years of university transfer), the majority of students reside in communities that have another post-secondary institution. Overwhelmingly students study part-time. Fewer than 5% of the AU student population studies full-time at AU.⁷

students, including a native woman, a prisoner in a federal penitentiary, and a senior citizen, revealed the frustrations and intellectual joys of studying independently at a distance. Byrne does not delve into the whether these graduates saw AU as an institution of second choice or second chance. For most, AU did remove some barriers to obtaining a university degree, a credential that otherwise would have been beyond their reach. beyond this one short chapter, little else exists on the perceptions of AU graduates toward the university.

⁵ The proportion of AU students who are women is very similar to the proportion of women among part-time university students in undergraduate studies in Canada in 1988. See Lucie Nobert, *Profile of Higher Education in Canada*, 1990 Edition (Ottawa: Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, 1991), p 6 Table 1.11. Table 1.7 shows that just over 50% of full-time undergraduate students are women (p. 4)

⁶ Less than 21% of AU students in 1988 were in the traditional university age group (17-25). See Richard Hotchkis, "Historical Active Student Profile," *AU Trends*, No. 8, November 1988. Nobert, *Profile of Higher Education*, p. 6 Table 1.12, indicates that in 1988 slightly more than one half of the part-time university enrolment was 30 years of age or over and slightly more than 75% were 25 years of age or over.

⁷ These characteristics are similar to students at other open and distance universities. A. Kaye, 1981; Schulz, 1986.

Why, therefore, do students enroll in distance and open universities? AU and other distance and open universities are often seen as institutions of second choice/chance. Some thought that students studying at open and distance universities did so "because they felt a need to improve their qualifications, and/or to gain expertise related to their personal ambitions and to the needs of their society"(Kaye 1981). Perry (1986) identified three central motives for students wishing to enrol in open universities. "The first group want[ed] to improve career prospects. The second group . . . want[ed] to study simply for the sake of study. And the third motive, a very strong one, is the prospect of emancipation" (e.g., the physically disabled). Schutze (1986) categorizes students as: "those who enter or re-enter higher education as adults in order to pursue mainstream studies leading to a full first degree or diploma ('delayers', 'deferrers' . . .)[,] those who re-enter to update their professional knowledge, or seek to acquire additional qualifications . . . ('recyclers', 'refreshers')[,] those without previous experience in higher education, who enrol for professional purposes especially in courses of short duration . . . [,] [and] those, with or without previous experience in higher education, who enrol for courses with the explicit purpose of personal fulfilment." Paul (1985) argues that for many urban students, distance education is a deliberate choice. Students "choose Athabasca over the other alternatives precisely because of its home study programme which permits course registration at the beginning of any month of the year and allows them to proceed at their own pace without the necessity of attending classes." For rural students, however, distance education may be "their only alternative."

For women, however, the reasons for studying at-a-distance may be somewhat more complex (Coulter, 1989; Spronk and Radtke, 1985; Ross and Powell, 1990). von Prummer (1990) outlines differences between men and women studying at the Fernuniversitat (Germany). Female students, she noted, "more often wish to prove themselves and to increase their self-esteem" and are "more interested in intellectual stimulation . . . and have more need to make up for a previous lack of opportunities." Men tend to "place more emphasis on career-related aspects of their studies", often seeking higher professional qualifications. Higher professional qualifications are important for women, but it ranks behind "self improvement" and "intellectual stimulation."

Coulter (1989) argues strongly that distance education served the needs of women in a variety of ways. Specifically, she argued that studying at a distance, especially in the AU model, allowed women an opportunity to combine study with the other demands on their life -- paid employment, family life, etc. Distance education, therefore, could be viewed as emancipatory, especially for women outside

major urban centres where access to higher education options are few.

The AU graduate: Who is she?

The questions to be answered, then, are how does the AU graduate fit within these discussions of the characteristics of students who study at a distance and how well does AU serve the distance education student. Also, does the AU graduate represent AU's student population and distance education students generally?

Three data sets were used: (1) a statistical analysis was made of all AU graduates over the last five years (number 458). The data used was from the institutional studies records of demographic profiles and student activity (e.g., number of courses taken, etc.) (2) student biographies read at the convocations (and hence public information), and (3) responses to a survey of all AU graduates. Convocation at Athabasca University is an intimate affair. With less than one hundred graduands each year, the University still adheres to the practice of reading from the podium "brief" biographies of students while they receive their hood and diploma. These public biographies contain a wealth of information on students and the struggles and triumphs encountered while studying for a university degree. The information from each of these data sets was then reviewed and analysed by the authors.

Since the mission of Athabasca University is to remove "the barriers that traditionally restrict access to and success in university-level studies and to increasing equality of educational opportunity . . ." (AU 1991 p. 1), specific barriers identified are: time, space, and past educational experience.

Space:

Because most AU students study where they are (the university can be in the home, in an office, or in a study centre), the barrier of space is greatly overcome. But how much so? In an analysis of 458 graduates over a five year period, we find that only 122 (27%) were from non-urban centres. Barriers of space and time are different for urban and rural students. For the urban student, the barrier of space (and time) may be the need to travel at night by public transport to and from a large institution to a remote residence. For many women students studying at home provides security instead the risk of late night travels from an urban institution (Coulter 1989). For rural students, space is often measured in hundreds of kilometers from their home to the urban campus. This is not a pleasant or appealing undertaking in the winter after a regular work day.

Time:

It is difficult to estimate how much the barrier of time has been reduced. Time can be simply removing the constraint of attending a weekly class, extending the study period of a semester course from thirteen weeks to six months, or removing the time limitation on completing a program. Anecdotal evidence of graduates themselves reveals that AU has succeeded in removing this barrier for many individuals.

Previous Educational Attainment

As an "open university" AU does not have formal requirements for entrance. The majority of AU graduates (72%) had some college or university education or a university degree before enrolling in AU. Although few registrants are enrolled in an AU program, AU has assisted graduates through its credit co-ordination (banking) program. Depending on the degree program in which they were enrolled, students transfer up to 100% of their courses into AU (BGS) while the standard "residency" requirement for AU degree programs (B.A., B.Admin., B. Comm. and B.N. (Post R.N)) ranges from 25-50%. Of the 458 graduates in the cohort, 49% (222) had taken fewer than 11 AU courses or 1/3 of a three year course of studies. Only 23 graduates (5.0%) had taken their full program at AU and 116 (25%) had taken the equivalent of a year of full-time study with AU. From the biographies of graduates, we see how the credit banking-coordination program assists students at AU. Chris W grew up in Ontario, attended a small university in central Ontario, teacher's college, and a large metropolitan university. Credits from each of these institutions were combined to provide her with an AU BGS degree. Rita, a resident of Alberta who was raised in Saskatchewan, combined courses from the British Open University with a university transfer program at an Alberta college and AU home study courses to qualify for an AU degree. Joan, born in the USA and now a resident of a southern Alberta town, attended at least five colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, including AU, to meet AU degree requirements. These cases demonstrate that AU helps to remove not only the barriers of space and time but also to open up to individuals who are mobile the opportunity to bring into a university setting equivalencies from other places.

Previous Educational Attainment.

A large number of AU graduates (96 or 21%) did not have the minimum entrance requirements for most

universities or colleges (senior matriculation). And, unlike at most institutions, it was not necessary for these graduates to endure additional barriers (e.g., entrance examinations for mature applicants) to enter a program of studies.

Other Constraints:

From graduate biographies, one is able to glean information on the persistence of AU students. It is not easy to undertake university-level studies when one is responsible for child care, holds down a job outside the home, or is required to transfer from place to place, either to follow a spouse or to be employed. Rarely, in the biographical vignettes, does an individual remain in her or his home town. Sandy, for example, grew up on a farm in central Alberta, attended school in another town, completed her diploma in the Yukon, studied at a junior college in Alberta, before completing her degree at AU. Her experience was common among graduands in her class.

What is exceptional about the graduates is that, while their experiences would be exceptional among graduands at most traditional university, they are commonplace among AU students. Anne, a single mother of two, had studied nursing before coming to Canada, and worked as a part-time nursing supervisor while completing her degree, in addition to a variety of volunteer activities. Ron took eight years to complete his degree while pursuing his career in the RCMP. Karen, a mother of four, worked as a nurse's aide and a teleconference administrator while completing her degree completely by home-study. Judy is a self employed business woman, and active member of a variety of business organizations. Sandra, at various times a waitress, cook for big-game outfitter, and bar-maid, as well as a mother of a one-and-a-half year old, completed her degree via home study after studying for three years at a college. Rose, a child welfare worker, mother of six, and volunteer in her community, first completed her high school education at an adult training centre and then completed a B.A. through AU and one of its native education centres. Gail attended six colleges and universities in Ontario, BC. and Alberta, earning college certificates, before graduating from AU. Ann, a part-time nursing supervisor and single parent, took three years to complete her degree, using it to advance to an administrative position in a regional hospital. Another woman, a mother of seven plus four step-children, grandmother to five, worked as a librarian, draftsman, accounting clerk and construction supervisor while pursuing her studies.

These individuals are not exceptional at an AU convocation!

What the AU Graduate Says

Institutional data on student characteristics and the biographies of students read at the convocation show that AU graduates are extremely mobile individuals who, through persistence, are able to complete a university degree. It is as important as well to learn what the graduates say about their experience at AU. Do the graduates themselves identify the "reducing of barriers" as a significant attribute of the university?

In a recent research study, AU graduates were asked: "What did AU mean to you?" The overwhelming majority of the graduates thought that the university had helped them in a way that other universities could not. Many stated that distance education enabled them to study at university courses when the traditional residential institutions imposed barriers of time and place that they were unable to overcome. Home study, according to one graduate, was especially welcome "because of our distance from traditional universities[.] AU provided a needed service for both my wife (currently enrolled in a second BA degree in French) and myself." A woman graduate explicitly delineated the benefits of home study: "For those in rural Alberta, it often is not possible to achieve our goals of higher education. I tried driving to Calgary - 70 miles - I burned out after 1 1/2 years. Athabasca was the answer for me. My Red Deer [College] and [University of] Calgary courses were accepted for credit" Another student confirmed that studying at a distance "was a wonderful opportunity to complete degree requirements without spending my time driving back and forth to the University of Calgary or wherever (I lived outside Calgary at that time)." Yet another asserted that studying at AU permitted him to get "a degree for my own satisfaction without [the expense of] having to move to a major city. This would have required leaving my family here." Rural students encounter greater costs and disruption of family life in their efforts to obtain university-level credentials.

For women, the requirements of paid and unpaid employment and family responsibilities often prevent them from accessing university programs at traditional institutions. For many of these women, studying at a distance was a liberating and confidence building experience. Studying at a distance (home study) permitted Cindy "to remain employed and provide for my children while I work[ed] towards fulfilling a dream. I was not financially able at anytime to quit work and attend school." "Initially it meant having the flexibility to maintain being a mother as well as being a more appropriate approach to education for adults," stated Linda. Gaile underlined the importance of being able to study while participating fully in her children's lives: "It meant that I was able to stay home and raise my children and participate in their activities, etc., at school . . . while studying and getting my degree. . . . It was

very important for me as a mother to be able to be here for my kids . . ." Other women graduates echoed these sentiments. In addition, the focus on "adult" students that permeates AU's approach to tuition was attractive to many students, especially women. Studying at AU, one woman stated, "enabled me to pursue studies I was interested in and to do that at my own pace while raising a family. I also appreciate being treated like an adult which has not been my experience" at other institutions.

While the experience of studying independently at a distance does not remove isolation, it did provide opportunities for women that were otherwise difficult to access. Women often drop out of higher education to raise families, to support a spouse while he trained for a career, or to relocate as the spouse's career dictated. Beatrice revealed that AU gave her an opportunity to pursue her degree while following her husband as he was transferred from one job location to another: "Studying through Athabasca University has enabled me to obtain a degree which would have been otherwise impossible due to the transfers within my husbands occupation. It also enabled me to study at my own pace while maintaining full-time employment; ... teaching me discipline and appropriate study habits." Sherry achieved much personal satisfaction from knowing that, "while working full-time and supporting my child, I was able to obtain the undergraduate degree I had failed to complete when I was younger." For one student, Diane, AU's university credit assessment programs and distance teaching were its attraction and strength:

Distance education has provided me with the opportunity of getting a degree while living in an area that does not have a degree grant institution. It also allowed me to do it while maintaining my family and household commitments. Most importantly AU recognized my university studies which I had done during the 1960s. It was important to me not to have to start over studying first year courses. It was also very important that AU recognized classes studied at different institutions and put them all together. This was very encouraging to me as I would take courses when and where they were available. For women who have interrupted their careers to devote their energies to raising a family this is very important. Education is education no matter what the name of the institution!

More than one graduate emphasized the way in which AU differed from traditional classroom based institutions. All argued that AU opened up opportunities because of its flexible instructional structure. Athabasca University, Jo-Ann stated, "gave me the opportunity to change my lifestyle and career by providing an avenue to study while still having an income. Conventional universities are so unwilling to

bend to the fact that people wish to continue living and not attend lectures from 8 am to 4:30 pm." Carol reinforced this view that AU reduced the barriers of space and time: "Studying at AU has enabled me to complete a degree I had begun several years earlier at a different institution, earn my credential, gain a more satisfying job with a generous salary, and generally provide me with the opportunity I would not have had otherwise, or if so, at a much greater expense. I believe in what AU does for its students." Yet another graduate, Yvonne demonstrated how she integrated AU's home-study programs with her "home-maker" career to help her obtain a teaching certificate. "Studying at Athabasca enabled me to complete courses I needed in order to get an Alberta Teaching Certificate without having to go to a city. ... I'm enjoying being a homemaker with a few days of casual work -- substitute teaching. There may be a day when I would like to work on a part-time basis."

Thus, the removal of barriers of time and distance, through a flexible study structure, was an attraction to many AU's graduates. The flexibility of structuring one's study schedule to one's work or home life is appealing to many adult students. Home-study and open admissions policies enabled some graduates to build their professional qualifications or to gain the education necessary for career mobility. Others found that this same flexibility assisted with personal as well as professional development opportunities. For example, not a few graduates underlined the need to be extremely disciplined and motivated to complete a course or degree by distance study. "I learned quite a bit about myself. I realized I could discipline myself to carry through with a study plan, obtain the degree. I feel very proud of what I've done, it took more than just attending classes at a nearby University. The will to succeed I guess." These traits are similar to those required for career mobility.

Many students stressed the way in which AU contributed to the development of their self-esteem which, for some, enhanced their career opportunities as well. Indeed, in the graduate survey, the development of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem was a most important thread that weaved through the responses. Andy stated: "Studying at AU has meant job stability, self esteem, greater insight, greater maturity and the development of self discipline. AU has meant a second chance for me. I was an alcoholic with no job, no marketable skills and no desire to move to the city to attend school. . . . I [now] do have marketable skills and am able to attend school via AU. Without AU and what it has meant to me, I fear where I would be today. As I gained credits at AU I gained self esteem and respect for myself and others. About halfway through my BGS program I realized my alcohol abuse was inconsistent with my new self image and entered treatment, AA, and began a life which has been very enjoyable. I regularly recommend AU to others. In the 9 years I attended I always had good tutors, found all courses well organized and found the administration both pleasant and helpful." Another

graduate emphasized the way in which studying at AU increased his self-esteem. AU "has enabled me to prove to myself that I could succeed academically, even at an older age than most students. It has also increased my awareness in political, financial, economic and social areas of life." Finally, for one graduate studying at a distance, although a difficult way to acquire a degree, gave him "more confidence in my job and social situations."

Since university degrees are prerequisites for many positions, it is not surprising that many graduates, mostly men, mentioned career development both as a motivation for undertaking studying at a distance and measured the efficacy of AU's credentials by their progression in a career pattern or to change one's career. David praised the university for providing him "with the tools to achieve all of my goals. Without AU, I would probably still be a semi-employed labourer. When my contract ends here at the [university] I will be managing a systems consulting division for a large firm of chartered accountants. This is a long way from the oilfield." Another student claimed that "AU offered me an opportunity to continue my studies while I continued to earn a living. Because of the erratic nature of the construction industry, I was able to devote much of my energies to my studies when work was slow, while setting my studies aside when work was available. ... I cannot envision any other context in which I could have achieved my objectives." Yet another graduate had fulfilled his goal of studying law. "The past 2 to 3 years have been a period of unprecedented self-development, expanding personal vistas, interest, stimulation and satisfaction. While it sounds like a cliché, I doubt I would have accomplished this without AU because traditional universities were useless to me. I was on shift work, lived in a small town, and had full family and employment responsibilities while doing my B.A." For another graduate his studies gave him "a new 'lease' on a rewarding satisfying career. Also it gave me the incentive to proceed with graduate studies. I have just finished my thesis on a Master's in Adult Education. The more I learn -- the more I find out I do not know and therefore I want to continue learning. I am considering going into a PhD program also."

However, as with graduates from traditional universities, some AU graduates found that their expectations of career enhancement were not met. Some who held high expectations were disappointed when their aspirations were not met. One AU student experienced response to his degree that students from all institutions encounter at some time: "I hoped that I would be able to get a better job. So far that has not occurred. I worked hard at my courses and I am a bit bitter that I am still unable to find work. People don't appear to understand the value of any degree -- it just is not recognized."

The foregoing demonstrates that AU graduates identified the removal of some barriers to higher

education as one of attractions of the university. Others failed to show how AU removed barriers to their post-secondary education, but this is not surprising as the university may simply have been the most convenient option among other degree granting institutions. For others, however, AU was much more than simply a "university", a way in which to obtain a degree. As noted above, many graduates revealed that AU enhanced their self-esteem. Personal growth, as defined by the graduates, was a central outcome of their studies. One woman who had unrewarding schooling experiences "came to realize that learning could be a positive experience. Examining the ideas of others made me more fully appreciate the legitimacy of a number of different perspectives. My personal values and career goals became more clear to me. My awareness of the value of higher education for personal development as well as career development has increased tremendously." Another woman graduate revealed that obtaining an AU degree "not only benefited me professionally and monetarily but also personally. I gained self-esteem and confidence and proved to myself that I could be self-directed and motivated. The flexible deadlines worked to my advantage (could complete sooner in some cases and sometimes I used the entire time frame - family and work constraints)."

Graduates, as Paul (1985) noted, often praised the institution for their successes and accepted as personal faults their inability to achieve. Since this study focuses on those who are "successful" it is fascinating to learn how many graduates, who otherwise might not have completed a degree, intended to pursue graduate studies, all the while praising the university for providing them with the opportunity and skills (including persistence) to undertake advanced studies. Claire expressed a feeling that is not unusual for many adult students: "I felt my education was inadequate and that I was lacking something. After my first course, I realized I was as capable as my classmates. I also was the first on both sides of our families to get a degree. There are still people who claim the degree isn't as valid as one from the U of A but I know how much work was involved. The degree gave me confidence and the courage to seek further education. I'd now like to pursue a doctorate. Taking courses through distance meets my time-lines and allows me the opportunity to study and work during my free time. I also generally put as much as I can into a course as I feel I only cheat myself in the long run." Elgin had "a very good feeling about Athabasca" and felt "indebted to it for the opportunity to earn a degree. As result of my success there I am now enrolled in the Geography (Environmental) program at Waterloo University and expect to graduate in the fall of 1991."

Discussion/Conclusions

Any analysis of graduate biographies and responses to the graduate survey provide conflicting

information on the two central research questions, viz., does AU serve the student clientele that its mission proposes and to what does the AU graduate attribute success. Depending on how one cuts across the data (biographies, responses to graduate survey, institutional studies data), they show that AU does reduce major barriers to higher education in Canada, Alberta primarily, especially the barriers of time, space and previous educational attainment.

To recapitulate, many graduates attended AU to improve their career prospects. Yet not all were 'recyclers' or 'refreshers', in Schutze's terminology. Many entered or re-entered to obtain their first degree ('delayers' or 'deferrers') but it is not clear how many simply wanted to study for the sake of study (Perry, 1986). From the perspective of the mandate of AU and other open and distance universities, these individuals, especially the women, are the students for whom the university was established. But they comprise a small proportion of the pool of all AU students and even a small proportion of potential students.

A pressing issue in post-secondary education is the impact of gender differences on accessibility and achievement - an implied barrier that AU attempts to overcome through its delivery mode and removal of most entrance requirements. Most AU students (68%) and graduates (63%) are women, their reasons for studying at a distance are different from those of the male students. The self-reported statements in the graduate survey support von Prummer's assertion that for women "self-improvement" and "intellectual stimulation" are more important than "higher professional qualifications". The graduate biographies, however, suggest that not a few women graduates used the AU degree to improve their entrepreneurial skills or qualifications to assist them in their workplace. Thus, while the anecdotal evidence supports the contention that AU does help to reduce the barriers to higher education among women, the data do not permit us to test conclusively von Prummer's assertion regarding motivations.

Did AU reduce barriers to post-secondary education for these women. From the biographies of graduates and the responses to graduate surveys we can glean enough information to state that indeed barriers to higher education (studies bound by time and space, residency requirements, etc.) were reduced for many of these students. But there are other barriers, the social barriers of the family and workplace, that are not at this time measurable.

A major barrier that AU, and other distance and open institutions, assist students to overcome, is the barrier of self-confidence. Again and again in the biographies and the survey research, the issue of

self-esteem and self-concept was raised by the students. While graduates often attribute to the institution the development of self-confidence, from the perspective of practitioners, it is the students not the institution who overcame this and other barriers. It is the student that decides for herself that it is important to open the course package on arrival in the mail, to telephone the tutor, to complete the assignment, to write the final examination in the specified time period. To do all this, while juggling family responsibilities and work, is not an easy task. To do all this, while overcoming the fear to failure, working in isolation without peer support, never knowing if other students are encountering similar difficulties, is the work of exceptional individuals.

Part of the difficulty in assessing whether the graduates represent the typical AU student is the composition of the graduates. They are a small, self-selecting group. Graduates make up less than one per cent of AU students. Many AU students do graduate from other universities (Powell, 1987), yet another way in which AU assists in overcoming barriers to higher education (in this case permitting students to complete their degree programs at other universities that accept AU course credits toward their degree requirements). As individuals who often take more than two courses (98% - the norm is less than 1.5 courses per individual student), AU graduates are exceedingly resilient. More than 57% of AU graduates took a third of their entire program with AU (equivalent to one year of full time study prior to the shift to a 4 year baccalaureate degree in 1989). However, less than 2% took their entire degree with AU. Other scholars (Paul, 1985; Spronk and Radtke 1985; Byrne, 1990) have demonstrated that the task of enrolling in AU courses, maintaining one's standing as an active student, and compiling enough credits to qualify for a degree is a monumental achievement. On the basis of this small sample, AU is modestly successful in achieving its mandate to break down barriers to post-secondary education for adult Canadians.

In summation, then, we can state that the biographies of graduates and the responses to graduate questionnaires support the assertion that AU does assist in the reduction, if not the removal, of barriers to post-secondary level studies for many individuals. The larger question of whether AU and, by implication, other distance and open universities actually serve the larger student population that needs to be served cannot at this time be answered conclusively.

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